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History

British Slaves on the Barbary Coast

By Robert Davis
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The fishermen and coastal dwellers of 17th-century Britain lived in terror of being kidnapped by pirates and sold into slavery in North Africa. Hundreds of thousands across Europe met wretched deaths on the Barbary Coast in this way. Professor Robert Davis investigates.

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Europe under attack

'When we had arrived [in Cork], I made a request to Lord Inchaquoin to give me a passport for England. I took boat to Youghal and then embarked on the vessel *John Filmer*, which set sail with 120 passengers. `But before we had lost sight of land, we were captured by Algerine pirates, who put all the men in irons.'

So wrote the Reverend Devereux Spratt - carried off in April 1641 for several years' bondage in Algiers, while attempting a simple voyage across the Irish Sea from County Cork to England. Spratt's experience has been largely forgotten now, though it was far from unique in his day.

> **...the corsairs plundered British shipping pretty much at will...**

In the first half of the 1600s, Barbary corsairs - pirates from the Barbary Coast of North Africa, authorised by their governments to attack the shipping of Christian countries - ranged all around Britain's shores. In their lanteen-rigged xebecs (a type of ship) and oared galleys, they grabbed ships and sailors, and sold the sailors into slavery. Admiralty records show that during this time the corsairs plundered British shipping pretty much at will, taking no fewer than 466 vessels between 1609 and 1616, and 27 more vessels from near Plymouth in 1625. As 18th-century historian Joseph Morgan put it, 'this I take to be the Time when those Corsairs were in their *Zenith*'.

Unfortunately, it was hardly the end of them, even then. Morgan also noted that he had a '...List, printed in London in 1682' of 160 British ships captured by Algerians between 1677 and 1680. Considering what the number of sailors who were taken with each ship was likely to have been, these examples translate into a probable 7,000 to 9,000 able-bodied British men and women taken into slavery in those years.

Not content with attacking ships and sailors, the corsairs also sometimes raided coastal settlements, generally running their craft onto unguarded beaches, and creeping up on villages in the dark to snatch their victims and retreat before the alarm could be sounded. Almost all the inhabitants of the village of Baltimore, in Ireland, were taken in this way in 1631, and other attacks were launched against coastal villages in Devon and Cornwall. Samuel Pepys gives a vivid account of an encounter with two men who'd been taken into slavery, in his diary of 8 February 1661.

'...to the Fleece tavern to drink and there we spent till 4 a-clock telling stories of Algier and the manner of the life of Slaves there; and truly, Captain Mootham and Mr Dawes (who have been both slaves there) did make me full acquainted with their condition there. As, how they eat nothing but bread and water.... How they are beat upon the soles of the feet and bellies at the Liberty of their Padron. How they are all night called into their master's Bagnard, and there they lie.'

> **...during these years, Britons were enslaved all too often.**

The very casualness of the account makes it clear just how commonplace unfortunates like Moontham and Dawes were in 17th-century Britain. Britons in later years have boasted that

they 'never will be slaves,' but during these years they were enslaved all too often.

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Estimating slave numbers

North African pirate ship ©

According to observers of the late 1500s and early 1600s, there were around 35,000 European Christian slaves held throughout this time on the Barbary Coast - many in Tripoli, Tunis, and various Moroccan towns, but most of all in Algiers. The greatest number were sailors, taken with their ships, but a good many were fishermen and coastal villagers. Out of all these, the British captives were mostly sailors, and although they were numerous there were relatively fewer of them than of people from lands close to Africa, especially Spain and Italy. The unfortunate southerners were sometimes taken by the thousands, by slavers who raided the coasts of Valencia, Andalusia, Calabria and Sicily so often that eventually it was said that 'there was no one left to capture any longer'.

There are no records of how many men, women and children were enslaved, but it is possible to calculate roughly the number of fresh captives that would have been needed to keep populations steady and replace those slaves who died, escaped, were ransomed, or converted to Islam. On this basis it is thought that around 8,500 new slaves were needed annually to replenish numbers - about 850,000 captives over the century from 1580 to 1680.

> **White slaves in Barbary were generally from impoverished families...**

By extension, for the 250 years between 1530 and 1780, the figure could easily have been as high as 1,250,000 - this is only just over a tenth of the Africans taken as slaves to the Americas from 1500 to 1800, but a considerable figure nevertheless. White slaves in Barbary were generally from impoverished families, and had almost as little hope of buying back their

freedom as the Africans taken to the Americas: most would end their days as slaves in North Africa, dying of starvation, disease, or maltreatment.

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The slave's lot

Slaves in chains ©

Slaves in Barbary fell into two broad categories. The 'public slaves' belonged to the ruling pasha, who by right of rulership could claim an eighth of all Christians captured by the corsairs, and buy all the others he wanted at reduced prices. These slaves were housed in large prisons known as baños (baths), often in wretchedly overcrowded conditions. They were mostly used to row the corsair galleys in the pursuit of loot (and more slaves) - work so strenuous that thousands died or went mad while chained to the oar.

During the winter these *galeotti* worked on state projects - quarrying stone, building walls or harbour facilities, felling timber and constructing new galleys. Each day they would be given perhaps two or three loaves of black bread - 'that the dogs themselves wouldn't eat' - and limited water; they received one change of clothing every year. Those who collapsed on the job from exhaustion or malnutrition were typically beaten until they got up and went back to work. The pasha also bought most female captives, some of whom were taken into his harem, where they lived out their days in captivity. The majority, however, were purchased for their ransom value; while awaiting their release, they worked in the palace as harem attendants.

> **...they received one change of clothing every year.**

Many other slaves belonged to 'private parties.' Their treatment and work varied as much as their masters did. Some were well cared for,

> **Some were well cared for, becoming**

becoming virtual companions of their owners. Others were worked as hard as any 'public' slave, in agricultural labour, or construction work, or selling water or other goods around town on his (or her) owner's behalf. They were expected to pay a proportion of their earnings to their owner - those who failed to raise the required amount typically being beaten to encourage them to work harder.

virtual companions of their owners...

As they aged or their owner's fortunes changed, slaves were resold, often repeatedly. The most unlucky ended up stuck and forgotten out in the desert, in some sleepy town such as Suez, or in the Turkish sultan's galleys, where some slaves rowed for decades without ever setting foot on shore.

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The European response

Europeans sometimes attempted to buy their people out of slavery, but no real system emerged before around 1640. Then the attempts became more systematic and were sometimes state subsidised, as in Spain and France. Almost all the actual work, however - from collecting the funds, to voyaging to Barbary, to negotiating with the slave owners there - was carried out by clergy, mostly members of the Trinitarian or Mercedarian orders.

A priest negotiates ransom for the release of slaves ©

Parish churches too, all over Spain and Italy, kept locked collection boxes marked 'for the poor slaves', with clerics constantly reminded their wealthier parishioners to include ransoming societies in their wills; slave-redeeming confraternities also sprouted in hundreds of cities and villages. Ransoming slaves

By the 1700s, the ransoming orders had significantly reduced slave populations in Barbary...

was promoted as being one of the best of the charitable works a Catholic could perform, since slaves were ideal victims: 'Their [only] fault, their crime, is recognising Jesus Christ as the most divine Saviour... and of professing Him as the True Faith.' By the 1700s, the ransoming orders had significantly reduced slave populations in Barbary, eventually even inflating slave prices, as more cash chased fewer captives.

Compared to Catholic Europe, Protestant states could be lax and disorganised in freeing their subjects. Thousands of Dutch, Germans and British 'languished for years in the chains of Barbary,' without the aid of organised clergy or state funds for their release. England set aside its 'Algerian Duty' from customs income to finance redemptions, but much of this was diverted to other uses. Large-scale ransomings - like the one headed by Edmund Casson that freed 244 men, women, and children in 1646 - were rare, with the result that Protestant Britons were often more demoralised and likely to die in captivity than European Catholics. As one ex-slave noted:

> **Thousands of Dutch, Germans and British "languished for years in the chains of Barbary"...**

'All of the nations made some shift to live, save only the English, who it seems are not so shiftful as others, and... have no great kindness one for another. The winter I was in [captivity], I observ'd there died above twenty of them out of pure want.'

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The legacy of enslavement

Many slaves converted to Islam, though, as Morgan put it, this only meant they were 'freed from the Oar, tho' not from [their] Patron's Service.' Christian women who had been taken into the pasha's harem often 'turned Turk' to stay with their children, who were raised as Muslims.

Men sought easier labours, usually as overseers for other slaves, and some gained real power and occasionally their freedom. Between 1580 and

> **In the 1600s, no one's racial**

1680, there were typically around 15,000 of these 'renegades' in Barbary, including around half of the corsair captains, or re'is, and even some of the pashas. Most had probably never been slaves, however, but had come to North Africa looking for opportunity, and had cast off their Christianity along with their earlier lives.

background or religion automatically destined him or her for enslavement.

Slaves in Barbary could be black, brown or white, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish or Muslim. Contemporaries were too aware of the sort of people enslaved in North Africa to believe, as many do today, that slavery, whether in Barbary or the Americas, was a matter of race. In the 1600s, no one's racial background or religion automatically destined him or her for enslavement. Preachers in churches from Sicily to Boston spoke of the similar fates of black slaves on American plantations and white slaves in corsair galleys; early abolitionists used Barbary slavery as a way to attack the universal degradation of slavery in all its forms.

This may require that we rethink our belief that race was fundamental to pre-modern ideas about slavery. It also requires a new awareness of the impact of slave raids on Spain and Italy - and Britain - about which we currently know rather less than we do about slaving activities at the same time in Africa. The widespread depopulation of coastal areas from Malaga to Venice, the impoverishment caused by the kidnapping of many breadwinners, the millions paid by the already poor inhabitants of villages and towns to get their own people back - all this is only just beginning to be understood by modern-day historians.

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